

# Case for investing in early childhood

BY M. OLIVIA LAGINA

I believe it is crucial for our society to provide for the developmental needs of our children. What happens in early childhood is the foundation for everything that follows. It has been conclusively demonstrated that brain development is determined in the first 1,000 days of life. By age 5, as much as 90 percent of a child's intellectual and emotional brain wiring has been set. In effect, a child has until 5 to acquire the learning and social skills necessary for a productive future.

It is not complex teaching that is required. A child simply needs a lot of human interaction — hugging, singing, playing, and being read and talked to by parents and adult caregivers.

We all know that Michigan needs to have the most intelligent and best trained work force to compete in the global economy. We only can obtain this goal if we nurture our very young children appropriately.

But right now, Michigan's youngest residents are falling behind. One third

of our infants and toddlers is not fully immunized. An estimated 40,000 4-year-olds qualify for, but do not receive, publicly subsidized preschool. A survey of kindergarten teachers found that, on average, 35 percent of the 150,000 Michigan children entering



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kindergarten each year are not ready to learn. The teachers cite a lack of opportunity to attend a preschool program as a primary factor in these children being behind their peers.

This is not just an emotional appeal. I see investment in early-childhood as investment in economic development.

"Dollars invested in early childhood development yield extraordinary public returns," according to two highly-regarded economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis.

For every \$1 invested in high-quality early care and

education, we can save \$17 in welfare, criminal justice and other social costs. Michigan saved an estimated \$1.1 billion last year alone because of school readiness efforts since 1984.

More than \$200 million of the K-12 budget is spent because grades are repeated and special education must be extended to preventable learning disabilities. Eleven percent of Michigan kindergartners repeat this grade at a cost of \$100 million a year. Another \$200 million is spent on juvenile corrections that can be traced to inadequate care and education before kindergarten.

These are concrete examples of the state incurring costs — borne by taxpayers — that are unnecessary.

A business case also can be made for strategic reform. A high-level consolidated state office of early childhood could result in more efficient and accountable delivery of early-childhood health and education services.

We have a tremendous opportunity in 2011 to elevate the business case

for early-childhood investment to a higher level of statewide priority. A new governor and new Legislature can score an early and crucial win by doing so.

As business leaders we must look to the bottom line for Michigan and the future of our economy.

We know that investing in early childhood pays off.

About the author: M. Olivia Lagina is a member of the Children's Leadership Council of Michigan, a statewide group of business leaders who support early-childhood investment. She is a board member of the Early Childhood Investment Corporation and the Traverse Bay Children's Advocacy Center. She is a retired petroleum geologist and lives in Traverse City with her husband, Marty.

About the forum: The forum is a periodic column of opinion written by Record-Eagle readers in their areas of interest or expertise. Submissions of 500 words or less may be made by e-mailing letters@record-eagle.com. Please include biographical information and a photo.

## a letter

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Documents: Submitted by Rep. Ray A. Franz